**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**ZECHARIAH-006. THE FOUNDER AND FINISHER OF THE TEMPLE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this house; his hands shall also finish it."*

*Zechariah 4:9*

I am afraid that Zerubbabel is very little more than a grotesque name to most Bible-readers, so I may be allowed a word of explanation as to him and as to the original force of my text. He was a prince of the blood royal of Israel, and the civil leader of the first detachment of returning exiles. With Joshua, the high priest, he came, at the head of a little company, to Palestine, and there pathetically attempted, with small resources, to build up some humble house that might represent the vanished glories of Solomon's Temple. Political enmity on the part of the surrounding tribes stopped the work for nearly twenty years. During all that time, the hole in the ground, where the foundations had been dug and a few courses of stones been laid, gaped desolate, a sad reminder to the feeble band of the failure of their hopes. But with the accession of a new Persian king, new energy sprang up, and new, favourable circumstances developed themselves. The Prophet Zechariah came to the front, although quite a young man, and became the mainspring of the renewed activity in building the Temple. The words of my text are, of course, in their plain, original meaning, the prophetic assurance that the man, grown an old man by this time, who had been honoured to take the first spadeful of soil out of the earth should be the man to bring forth the headstone with shoutings of Grace, grace unto it!

But whilst that is the original application, and whilst the words open to us a little door into long years of constrained suspension of work and discouraged hope, I think we shall not be wrong if we recognise in them something deeper than a reference to the Prince of David's line, concerning whom they were originally spoken. I take them to be, in the true sense of the term, a Messianic prophecy; and I take it that, just because Zerubbabel, a member of that royal house from which the Messiah was to come, was the builder of the Temple, he was a prophetic person. What was true about him primarily is thereby shown to have a bearing upon the greater Son of David who was to come thereafter, and who was to build the Temple of the Lord. In that aspect I desire to look at the words now: His hands have laid the foundation of the house, and His hands shall also finish it.

**I. There is, then, here a large truth as to Christ, the true Temple-builder.**

It is the same blessed message which was given from His own lips long centuries after, when He spoke from heaven to John in Patmos, and said, I am Alpha and Omega, the First and the Last. The first letter of the Greek alphabet, and the last letter of the Greek alphabet, and all the letters that lie between, and all the words that you can make out of the letters--they are all from Him, and He underlies everything.

Now that is true about creation, in the broadest and in the most absolute sense. For what does the New Testament say, with the consenting voice of all its writers? In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. Without Him was not anything made that was made. His hands laid the foundations of this great house of the universe, with its many mansions. And what says Paul? He is the Beginning, in Him all things consist ... that in all things He might have the pre-eminence. And what says He Himself from heaven? I am the First and the Last. So, in regard to everything in the universe, Christ is its origin, and Christ is its goal and its end. He has laid the foundation, and His hands shall also finish it.

But, further, we turn to the application which is the more usual one, and say that He is the Beginner and Finisher of the work of redemption, which is His only from its inception to its accomplishment, from the first breaking of the ground for the foundations of the Temple to the triumphant bringing forth of the last stone that crowns the corner and gleams on the topmost pinnacle of the completed structure. There is nothing about Jesus Christ, as it seems to me, more manifest, unless our eyes are blinded by prejudice, than that the Carpenter of Nazareth, who grew up amidst the ordinary conditions of infant manhood, was trained as other Jewish children, increased in wisdom, spoke a language that had been moulded by man, and inherited His nation's mental and spiritual equipment, yet stands forth on the pages of these four Gospels as a perfectly original man, to put it on the lowest ground, and as owing nothing to any predecessor, and not as merely one in a series, or naturally accounted for by reference to His epoch or conditions. He makes a new beginning; He presents a perfectly fresh thing in the history of human nature. Just as His coming was the introduction into the heart of humanity of a new type, the second Adam, the Lord from heaven, so the work that He does is all His own. He does it all Himself, for all that His servants do in carrying out the purposes dear to His heart is done by His working in and through them, and though we are fellow-labourers with Him, His hands alone lay every stone of the Temple.

Not only does my text, in its highest application, point to Jesus Christ as the Author of redemption from its very beginning, but it also declares that all through the ages His hand is at work. Shall also finish it--then He is labouring at it now; and we have not to think of a Christ who once worked, and has left to us the task of developing the consequences of His completed activity, but of a Christ who is working on and on, steadily and persistently. The builders of some great edifice, whilst they are laying its lower courses, are down upon our level, and as the building rises the scaffolding rises, and sometimes the platform where they stand is screened off by some frail canvas stretched round it, so that we cannot see them as they ply their work with trowel and mortar. So Christ came down to earth to lay the courses of His Temple that had to rest upon earth, but now the scaffolding is raised and He is working at the top stories. Though out of our sight, He is at work as truly and energetically as He was when He was down here. You remember how strikingly one of the Evangelists puts that thought in the last words of his Gospel--if, indeed, they are his words. He was received up into heaven, and sat at the right hand of God, and they went everywhere, preaching the word. Well, that looks as if there were a sad separation between the Commander and the soldiers that He had ordered to the front, as if He were sitting at ease on a hill overlooking the battlefield from a safe distance and sending His men to death. But the next words bring Him and them together--The Lord also working with them, and confirming the word with signs following. And so, brethren, a work begun, continued, and ended by the same immortal Hand, is the work on which the redemption of the world depends.

**II. Notice, secondly, that we have here the assurance of the triumph of the Gospel.**

No doubt, in the long-forgotten days in which my text was spoken, there were plenty of over-prudent calculators in the little band of exiles who said, What is the use of our trying to build in face of all this opposition and with these poor resources of ours? They would throw cold water enough on the works of Zerubbabel, and on Zechariah who inspired them. But there came the great word of promise to them, He shall bring forth the headstone with shoutings. The text is the cure for all such calculations by us Christian people, and by others than Christian people. When we begin to count up resources, and to measure these against the work to be done, there is little wonder if good men and bad men sometimes concur in thinking that the Gospel of Jesus Christ has very little chance of conquering the world. And that is perfectly true, unless you take Him into the calculation, and then the probabilities look altogether different. We are but like a long row of ciphers, but put one significant figure in front of the row of ciphers and it comes to be of value. And so, if you are calculating the probabilities of the success of Christianity in the world and forget to start with Christ, you have left out the principal factor in the problem. Churches lose their fervour, their members die and pass away. He renews and purifies the corrupted Church, and He liveth for ever. Therefore, because we may say, with calm confidence, His hands have laid the foundation of the house, and His hands are at work on all the courses of it as it rises, we may be perfectly sure that the Temple which He founded, at which He still toils, shall be completed, and not stand a gaunt ruin, looking on which passers-by will mockingly say, This man began to build and was not able to finish. When Brennus conquered Rome, and the gold for the city's ransom was being weighed, he clashed his sword into the scale to outweigh the gold. Christ's sword is in the scale, and it weighs more than the antagonism of the world and the active hostility of hell. His hands have laid the foundation; His hands shall also finish it.

**III. Still further, here is encouragement for despondent and timid Christians.**

Jesus Christ is not going to leave you half way across the bog. That is not His manner of guiding us. He began; He will finish. Remember the words of Paul which catch up this same thought: Being confident of this very thing, that He which hath begun a good work in you will perfect the same until the day of Jesus Christ. Brethren! if the seed of the kingdom is in our hearts, though it be but as a grain of mustard seed, be sure of this, that He will watch over it and bless the springing thereof. So, although when we think of ourselves, our own slowness of progress, our own feeble resolutions, our own wayward hearts, our own vacillating wills, our many temptations, our many corruptions, our many follies, we may well say to ourselves, Will there ever be any greater completeness in this terribly imperfect Christian character of mine than there is to-day? Let us be of good cheer, and not think only of ourselves, but much rather of Him who works on and in and for us. If we lift up our hearts to Him, and keep ourselves near Him, and let Him work, He will work. If we do not--like the demons in the old monastic stories, who every night pulled down the bit of walling that the monks had in the daytime built for their new monastery--by our own hands pull down what He, by His hand, has built up, the structure will rise, and we shall be builded together for a habitation of God through the Spirit. Be of good cheer, only keep near the Master, and let Him do what He desires to do for us all. God is faithful who hath called us to the fellowship of His Son, and He also will do it.

**IV. Lastly, here is a striking contrast to the fate which attends all human workers.**

There are very few of us who even partially seem to be happy enough to begin and finish any task, beyond the small ones of our daily life. Authors die, with books half finished, with sentences half finished sometimes, where the pen has been laid down. No man starts an entirely fresh line of action; he inherits much from his past. No man completes a great work that he undertakes; he leaves it half-finished, and coming generations, if it is one of the great historical works of the world, work out its consequences for good or for evil. The originator has to be contented with setting the thing going and handing on unfinished tasks to his successors. That is the condition under which we live. We have to be contented to do our little bit of work, that will fit in along with that of a great many others, like a chain of men who stand between a river and a burning house, and pass the buckets from end to end. How many hands does it take to make a pin? How many did it take to make the cloth of our dress? The shepherd out in Australia, the packer in Melbourne, the sailors on the ship that brought the wool home, the railwayman that took it to Bradford, the spinner, the weaver, the dyer, the finisher, the tailor--they all had a hand in it, and the share of none of them was fit to stand upright by itself, as it were, without something on either side of it to hold it up.

So it is in all our work in the world, and eminently in our Christian work. We have to be contented with being parts of a mighty whole, to do our small piece of service, and not to mind though it cannot be singled out in the completed whole. What does that matter, as long as it is there? The waters of the brook are lost in the river, and it, in turn, in the sea. But each drop is there, though indistinguishable.

Multiplication of joy comes from division of labour, One soweth and another reapeth, and the result is that there are two to be glad over the harvest instead of one--that he that soweth and he that reapeth may rejoice together. So it is a good thing that the hands that laid the foundations so seldom are the hands that finish the work; for thereby there are more admitted into the social gladness of the completed results. The navvy that lifted the first spadeful of earth in excavating for the railway line, and the driver of the locomotive over the completed track, are partners in the success and in the joy. The forgotten bishop who, I know not how many centuries ago, laid the foundations of Cologne Cathedral, and the workmen who, a few years since, took down the old crane that had stood for long years on the spire, and completed it to the slender apex, were partners in one work that reached through the ages.

So let us do our little bit of work, and remember that whilst we do it, He for whom we are doing it is doing it in us, and let us rejoice to know that at the last we shall share in the joy of our Lord, when He sees of the travail of His soul and is satisfied. Though He builds all Himself, yet He will let us have the joy of feeling that we are labourers together with Him. Ye are God's building; but the Builder permits us to share in His task and in His triumph.